

D S DEVLIN
& CHARLOTTE PHILLIPS

The Present

There's something
inside you won't
expect



D S. Devlin

**The Present: The must-read
Christmas Crime of the year!**

«HarperCollins»

Devlin D. S.

The Present: The must-read Christmas Crime of the year! /
D. S. Devlin — «HarperCollins»,

This book can also be read with The Present by Charlotte Phillips. Two books, one unforgettable Christmas... 12 deadly gifts, one killer on a Christmas countdown... On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me... this is one deadly Christmas that you can't forget. The police are baffled by the 'Santa' killer, who sends his intended victims gruesome presents based on the twelve days of Christmas. When a young journalist receives a mutilated bird in the post, it's a race against time to find the killer...

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D S DEVLIN



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Prologue

The van arrived in the dark and silent hours before the dawn. It came slowly, crawling at a snail's pace, its headlights off, its engine making barely a whisper. As it passed from one street to the next, its blacked-out windows stared like the unblinking eyes of a doll at the suburban houses on either side, at the neat driveways and trimmed hedges with their sprinkling of early December frost, at the fairy lights and decorated trees and plastic snowmen adorning the well-kept gardens.

Without indicating, the van turned slowly into Beechcroft Avenue, then into Hazelwood Road, then into Sycamore Drive, until finally it came inching along Elm Crescent. Here, at last, it stopped, pulling up against the kerb outside number 19.

19 Elm Crescent.

An unremarkable address in an unremarkable street in an unremarkable London suburb. But within the next twenty-four hours, that address would be known all over the country, as would the names of the young couple who lived there.

Ben and Sharon Steiner.

The black van sat outside number 19, its engine idling.

Then, with a sigh, the engine died.

Silence.

Stillness.

A minute passed.

Without a sound, a black figure slipped from the van and passed like a shadow along the drive of number 19. Effortlessly, expertly, carrying out a plan that had been well prepared in advance, the figure ducked around the side of the house. There was a momentary glint of light as a sharp-edged cutting tool was carefully scored across a window pane. Then a circle of glass was prised away, a black-gloved hand reached inside to unlatch the lock, and two heartbeats later the black figure was inside the house.

The intruder inched through the darkness of the living room, past the decorated tree, past the array of early Christmas cards on the mantelpiece, past the framed photograph of Ben and Sharon on their wedding day, smiling blissfully, revelling in their big day, and revelling too in the start of what was sure to be a long and joyful life together. Whatever the future had in store for them, it would be wonderful. Wonderful.

Reaching the hallway, the black figure stopped at the foot of the staircase and glared silently up towards the first-floor landing and the closed bedroom door just visible there.

The intruder paused.

A gloved hand clutched the wooden handle of a hatchet.

From behind the blank face of a balaclava came slow, regular breathing.

The breathing got faster. Faster, and more guttural, more animal-like.

A thick gobbet of saliva fell against the ragged mouth hole of the balaclava and soaked into the black material.

And then, suddenly, as if reacting to a starting pistol no one else could hear, the intruder charged forward, pounding up the stairs at full speed, taking them two at a time, careless of the racket made by heavy boots on the wooden treads.

It was that thundering of boots on the stairs that awoke Ben Steiner, bringing him suddenly bolt upright in bed.

And it was the crash of the bedroom door flying open that awoke Sharon Steiner, bringing *her* as suddenly bolt upright, as wide-eyed and terrified as her husband.

The black figure was on them before they had a chance, pounding across the bedroom in three huge strides, looming over them, raising the hatchet and bringing it down with sickening force. The

axe blade embedded itself into Ben Steiner's rib cage and jammed there so firmly that when Ben jerked and convulsed from the bed, he took the hatchet with him. It remained jutting from his chest even as he sprawled onto the floor, drumming and thrashing amid a dark torrent of blood.

Sharon Steiner opened her mouth to scream, but the black-gloved hand struck her like a hammer – once, twice, three times, then again – silencing her.

The intruder did not want her to scream.

Not tonight. Not here.

The screaming was all to come later, in the place that had been prepared for her.

And she would not be screaming alone.

Chapter 1

‘I want to find her, Guv,’ Anna Vaughan said firmly. ‘I want to find her while she’s still alive – and I want to find the bastard who took her.’

Anna was in her editor’s office – if this cramped and chaotic room strewn with papers and files, unwashed coffee cups and overflowing rubbish bins, battered laptops and tangled computer wires could be called anything as grand as an ‘office’. But it served its purpose. It was from here – five floors up in a ramshackle building tucked away in London’s Soho district – that the investigative digital newspaper *After-Dark* was run. The editor – known to everyone as The Guv – was incapable of cleaning her desk or sorting out clutter, but she damn well knew how to get stories online – *good* stories, *exclusive* stories. In the three years Anna had worked here as a journalist, *After-Dark* had exposed corporate corruption in the Square Mile solved cold murder cases, brought down *two* serving members of Parliament by exposing their sordid pasts, uncovered terrorist cells and paedophile rings and people traffickers, and more besides. The Guv, and most of the journalists who worked for her, had been threatened, intimidated, even attacked. But they had never been silenced. *After-Dark* continued to speak up, speak out, speak the truth about the darkest and vilest corners of society.

‘You think Sharon Steiner is still alive?’ the Guv asked, glaring fiercely from behind the heaps of chaos on her desk.

‘Yes, I think she’s alive. I think Santa took her, and he never kills his female victims until Christmas Day. Look.’ And Anna held out a sheaf of papers, her research into the serial killer the police had nicknamed Santa. ‘Twelve years ago, first week of December, Kelly Nicholson and her husband Ross are attacked in their bed while sleeping. Ross is killed, Kelly is abducted, the police make no progress, and Kelly turns up dead just before New Year. Two years later, exactly the same pattern with Patricia and Michael Reading. Then again two years after that with Laura and Daniel Sayles. Then again, and again, and always the same pattern – a young couple attacked in their bed in early December, the husband killed, the wife abducted, the police floundering, and the wife’s body left out to be discovered by the New Year. And every time the pathologist’s report conclusively states that the female victim was killed no sooner than Christmas Day. The Christmas Day killer. That’s why they called him Santa.’

‘You’ve certainly been doing your homework.’

‘If it’s Santa who’s taken Sharon Steiner, then he’ll keep her alive until the twenty-fifth. And that means there’s a chance I can find her and save her.’

‘Fifteen days,’ the Guv said. ‘You think you can manage it in fifteen days?’

‘I don’t have any choice. It’s Santa sets the time limit, not me. *Somebody* has to find Steiner, Guv. CID are getting nowhere. No clues, no leads, no suspects. They’re incompetent. I’ve got sources *inside* the police tipping me off about how hopeless CID is. They’re the Keystone Kops. Now, the DI in charge of the Steiner case is holding a press conference this afternoon. It’s the perfect opportunity for me to confront him face to face with what this whistleblower inside the police has been telling me. It’ll *really* put a rocket up him, maybe even shake him and his department up enough to start doing their jobs properly. Then, when I’ve woken CID up, I’ll set out to pick up Sharon Steiner’s trail for myself, track her down, and find her.’

‘Whatever’s left of her.’

‘Her *and* the psycho who took her. If CID can’t manage it, *I* will.’

The Guv shrugged and nodded: ‘Well, I can’t deny you earned your stripes with this sort of thing. You did an amazing job last summer covering the Underwood story.’

The Underwood story. A missing boy, a stalled police investigation going nowhere, and Anna Vaughan right there in the middle of it, finding little Josh Underwood alive, revealing his father as the abductor, and deeply embarrassing CID by obliging an investigative journalist to do their job for

them. It had all made great copy for *After-Dark* and boosted Anna's reputation as a reporter who really got things done – but it had also soured relations between her and the police. Those relations were not destined to become any more cordial, not after she publicly confronted them with the insider information she had received from her anonymous whistleblower inside the police.

'You know I'm the right person for this story, Guv,' Anna insisted.

'This Steiner business is a far cry from the Underwood case,' the Guv warned her. 'It's *far* more violent, *far* more dangerous.'

'All the more reason to find that missing girl as soon as possible. I know I can do it, Guv. I know I can get a result.'

The Guv eyed her keenly for a moment, then said: 'You're a first-rate hack, no doubt about it. And you pulled a blinder with the Underwood story. But nobody gets it right *all* the time. There are no guarantees, God knows not in *this* business, Anna.'

'I know that, Guv.'

'And you've rattled CID's cage once already this year. You won't find a warm welcome there if you go waltzing in shouting the odds about them yet again.'

'I'm not looking for a warm welcome, I'm looking for Sharon Steiner and the man who took her. That's all that matters.'

'Possibly,' the Guv said, almost to herself. Then she lit up a cigarette – no law could be passed that was ever going to stop *her* from bloody smoking in her own bloody office – she drew deeply on it, exhaled thoughtfully, and said: 'Well – you'd better jump to it, then.'

But just as Anna was striding out the door, the Guv called to her: 'But don't get cocky, Anna. Remember Miles. Remember what happened to him.'

Anna paused, thought for a moment, then replied: 'I remember Miles, Guv. And I take your point. I'll be careful.'

And with that, she strode away, heading down the interminable staircase that always reeked of cabbage, making for the filthy streets of Soho far below.

As she drove through the congested London traffic making her way to the police press conference, the Guv's words kept playing through her mind:

'Remember Miles. Remember what happened to him.'

Miles Carter.

She could picture him very clearly, the way he had been five years ago when she'd first started at *After-Dark*. With his rumpled jacket and chaotic mop of dark hair and his big, wide, beaming face that kept creasing up into an irrepressible grin, she had instantly warmed to the older and more experienced journalist. And he had warmed to her, too, taking her under his wing. Through a combination of encouragement, criticism, teasing and lavish praise, Miles had given her as comprehensive a crash course into journalism as she could have hoped for. Anna had even started to suspect that their working relationship might blossom into something more personal. There had certainly been a hint of chemistry between them.

And then it all changed. Suddenly. Abruptly. Horribly.

About six months after Anna had started working at *After-Dark*, Miles had embarked upon an extensive investigation into cold cases stashed away in the CID murder files. He said very little to Anna about the details of his research, but from time to time he confided in her about the grimness of his work, the sadness that weighed down on him when he contemplated just how many innocent lives had been snuffed out over the years and without the killers responsible being brought to justice.

'I've started to feel I owe these victims something,' he said once to Anna. *'It doesn't feel like investigative journalism any more, it feels more like a moral obligation. Where CID have thrown in the towel, I feel it's my job to pick it up again, to reopen the cases, to see that these victims receive at least some sort of justice.'*

He began making contact with dark and shadowy people deep in the underworld, people who could furnish him with clues and leads with which to track down old killers.

And then – something happened. Something between Miles and a man he had gone to meet. Miles disappeared. It was as if he had vanished from the face of the earth. No trace of him. No word from him.

And then, two weeks later, the police had come to the *After-Dark* offices to say that they'd found him. Miles had been discovered roaming the streets of the suburbs, half-starved, dishevelled, mistreated, and barely coherent. During the slow period of his convalescence, he would tell nobody where he had been or what had happened to him. He declined to give a statement to the police. He refused to reveal anything to the Guv. He would not even divulge anything to Anna, though she would spend hours at his bedside in the hospital and then later visit him at the rambling Hampstead townhouse he had inherited from his mother and where he lived alone.

Physically, Miles recovered. But, psychologically, he remained fragile, too much so to return to work at *After-Dark*. Anna would visit him and was always shocked at how vulnerable he continued to appear, how anxious he was at the most innocuous sounds in the street outside, how reluctant he was for her to leave him alone again when it was time for her to go.

From time to time she would ask him gently, 'Miles – what happened to you?'

Only once did he ever break his silence about the matter. Looking at her intensely, forcing a sad smile, he had said, 'I got too close.'

'Too close to what, Miles?'

'I got too close,' he had repeated softly. 'And I learnt my lesson.'

And that was all he ever said about his nightmare.

It had been a salutary lesson to all the team working at *After-Dark*. They all of them dived with danger in the course of their investigations. Any one of them could end up like poor Miles Carter – broken, traumatised, or worse. If Anna got too close to the Santa killer, and if she was careless, and if she took one wrong step and put herself in excessive danger, then ...

Pushing her fears out of her mind as best she could, she pulled into the car park of the police station where CID was holding its press conference. Parking up, she took a moment to check her reflection in the rear-view mirror, examining her oval face, her keen eyes, her strong nose with its slight Roman arch, the generous mouth, the blonde hair scraped back and held in a messy bundle behind her head.

'You won't end up like Miles,' she told her reflection. She spoke firmly, with conviction. But all the same, there was still a hint of fear in those reflected eyes looking back at her.

Anna headed into the police station and was directed to a cramped, drab room which was to house the press conference. There were no seats provided, so she jostled her way through the press scrum, getting as near to the podium as she could manage, fighting to keep her ground until the conference began.

Waiting for things to start, she examined the police handout she had been given, but there was nothing on it that she wasn't already familiar with. Dominating the handout was the photo of Ben and Sharon Steiner on their wedding day, beaming into the camera without a care in the world. The whole country knew that photo by now; it had appeared in every newspaper and flashed up time and again on the news.

But despite the familiarity, the picture still chilled Anna's blood. The innocence in the faces of that couple was painful to behold. In that joyful moment when they'd posed together in the sunshine, they'd had no idea – not even an inkling – of the agony and horror that would suddenly descend upon their lives without warning, of the fact that one would disappear overnight and the other would be left dead in a pool of blood.

A door opened suddenly and a man in a dark suit strode up onto the podium. He was tall, well built, with dark hair and angular, very serious features. His keen, rather piercing eyes surveyed

the room as if trying to pick out an individual face from the crowd. When that intense stare fell upon Anna he seemed to pause and scrutinise her with particular interest, or maybe even hostility. Did he recognise her as the hack who had humiliated CID the previous summer on account of the Underwood case?

Anna refused to be intimidated. She held his stare, unblinking, for what felt like minutes but could only have been a heartbeat or two – and then the man turned his attention elsewhere, checked his notes, tapped the microphone, and addressed the room:

‘Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for attending this press conference. My name is DI Jim Townsend of Middlesex CID, B Division, and, as I’m sure you are aware, I am the officer charged with heading the investigation into the recent disappearance of Ben and Sharon Steiner. Now, before I update you as regards the current state of the investigation, I feel it necessary to address certain criticisms and accusations which some amongst you have made against CID in recent months in relation to the abduction of Josh Underwood.’

And now he *surely* shot a cold glance at Anna.

‘Our professionalism and integrity was called into question on account of that case,’ DI Townsend went on. ‘I have no intention of rebutting those accusations point by point so I will restrict myself to saying simply this: CID is, and always will be, dedicated to each and every task assigned to it. In the current case, myself and my investigative team are totally committed to discovering the whereabouts of Sharon Steiner, and, as far as is humanly possible, returning her safely to her family and loved ones. We are no less committed to apprehending whoever was responsible for the brutal murder of Sharon’s husband Ben. Our investigation is being carried out with rigour, dedication, and with the utmost professionalism. Any and all accusations to the contrary are unfounded and unjustified.’

‘DI Townsend, why have the forensics samples taken at the crime scene not been properly analysed yet?’ Anna called out.

The other journalists packing the room poised themselves expectantly for an answer.

Townsend turned his cold stare back towards Anna and said: ‘I am not at liberty to discuss forensics reports publicly at the current time.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because such information may prejudice the ongoing investigation.’

‘Assuming you *had* such information,’ Anna said boldly. ‘Detective Inspector Townsend, I have a source inside Middlesex CID who has informed me that the forensics samples taken from the crime scene were contaminated due to mishandling by an inexperienced forensics team.’

‘Untrue,’ Townsend said bluntly.

‘And I have also been informed that CCTV footage from security cameras in the vicinity of 19 Elm Crescent – footage which almost certainly would have contained images of whoever attacked and abducted the Steiners – was not seized as evidence and has since been erased.’

‘Untrue,’ Townsend repeated, an edge of anger creeping into his voice.

‘And what’s more, Detective Inspector, that same source revealed to me that basic investigational procedures were not followed by you and your officers when you first arrived at the crime scene ...’

‘Untrue.’

‘... resulting in evidence gained at that time being declared inadmissible in any subsequent trial.’

‘All untrue.’

‘And that, on account of budgetary restrictions, lack of manpower, and even *shortage of available computers in CID*, the investigation has in reality been postponed, or at the very least seriously curtailed pending financial review.’

‘Excuse me, are you who I think you are?’ Townsend spoke in a low, hard voice, glaring at her.

‘Anna Vaughan, *After-Dark*.’

Townsend nodded to himself, narrowed his eyes, and said: 'I might advise you, Ms Vaughan, that your talents and capabilities could for once be put to better use than vilifying me and my department.'

'And I might advise *you*, Detective Inspector Townsend, that I am merely making public the information that has been passed to me by a whistleblower inside your own department.'

'Not so, Ms Vaughan.'

'You're accusing me of lying?'

'I am accusing you of not adequately checking your sources. There is no such "whistleblower" in my department. It's impossible. You are, I can assure you, the victim of a hoax.'

Various shouts and cries came from the press, but Anna strained her voice to be heard over the top of them: 'Then where are the forensics reports? Where is the CCTV footage? Why has the investigation been scaled back so quickly? Why are there no leads? Why are there no suspects?'

But now Anna's voice was drowned out completely by the bellowing coming from the other journalists. Townsend stood there at his podium, ignoring all the shouting and hollering, his eyes fixed icily on Anna, his mouth set firmly, his jaw muscles visibly flexing. It was an expression which said, without any shadow of a doubt: *You have made an enemy here today, Ms Vaughan ... believe me, you have made an enemy.*

It was dark by the time Anna got home to her East London flat. Dark and cold and grim. The festive lights flashing and sparkling around the city did their best to alleviate the gloom, but they didn't manage to lift Anna's spirits. The image of Sharon Steiner's innocently smiling face was etched into her mind. What nightmare was that poor young woman enduring at this very moment, alone and terrified and held captive by the psychopathic Santa? What state was she in? And what hope of salvation did she have when CID seemed so wilfully incompetent? The shoddiness of the investigation being headed by DI Townsend had left Anna feeling angry and depressed. Sharon Steiner's life depended on those clowns doing their job right. How could they be so shoddy in their search for her? They were police officers, for God's sake – did they not have consciences?

Back at her flat, Anna kicked off her shoes, poured herself a stiff drink, and slumped down in the sofa. Her head was buzzing. She was restless and agitated. Living alone was wretched at times like this, times when you felt the profound need to give voice to your feelings, to communicate, to discuss. She fiddled with her phone, scrolling through names, looking for somebody she knew would be around and willing to talk to her. Family, old friends from university, fellow hacks in the *After-Dark* offices ... one after the other she flicked through their names and numbers, but somehow, for all the affection she felt for these people, it was always Miles Carter she wanted to speak to most when she had something serious on her mind.

She had stayed in contact with Miles, right through the years of his mental breakdown and slow, ongoing recovery. She liked him. He always seemed genuinely delighted if she rang or dropped by, he continued to take a keen interest in her work at *After-Dark*, and even now, despite the fragile state he was in and the lingering effects of the mysterious trauma he had suffered, he still possessed a silly, schoolboyish sense of humour and an honest warmth that always made her feel safe with him.

She scrolled through to his number and dialled it. And as ever, he was in. He never seemed to go out much these days.

She came straight out with, 'Miles, I'm angry.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I apologise unreservedly.'

'Not with *you*, you great dope, it's CID!'

'And what have *they* done?'

'Nothing! That's why I'm so mad at them! If you'd seen the press conference today you'd understand. Jesus Christ, don't they understand they've got a serial killer on their hands? A young woman's life is hanging by a thread and all they can do is dick about and screw up their investigation and give stupid press conferences to try and cover their useless arses! It's obscene! It sickens me, Miles. I'm not standing for it. I'll find that poor girl myself if that's what it takes. I'll find and save

her because *somebody* has to! And then I'll publicly roast hell out of CID with a whole series of articles! No, better than that, I'll write a book! I'll write a bloody great book that'll sink so-called DI Townsend's career once and for all! The bastard! The arrogant, useless, amoral bastard!

There was a pause.

And then Miles said mildly: 'Well, *I've* got a bit of sticky toffee pudding left over from yesterday so *I'm* happy as a sand boy.'

Despite herself, Anna grinned. This, of course, was why she had rung him up. She didn't want to rail against the injustices of the world, not after having been railing against them all day already. She just wanted a friendly voice, a little dose of normality. And Miles could always be relied upon for that.

'I'm sorry, Miles,' she said, snuggling down with the phone and her drink. 'It's been a hellish day. I just needed to speak to somebody.'

'I've been out of the game for a while, Anna, but I'm still a journalist at heart,' Miles said. 'I know *exactly* how you feel. No need to explain. Rant all you like, get it out of your system, I promise I won't hang up. I would *never* hang up. I might sit here watching *Come Dine With Me* with the sound down while you drone on and on, but rest assured I would never actually hang up. Come to think of it, I might hang up if *Come Dine With Me* looked like it was getting really good. I mean to say, how could I not?'

'Miles – thank you for talking your usual crap to me. I needed it. Big time. I feel grounded again. How are you doing over there in Hampstead?'

'I'm getting through the days, Anna. I'm surviving.'

'Any chance you'll be feeling well enough to get back in the saddle some time soon?'

Anna was always asking him this. He was too good a journalist to waste his talents moping about the house all day. *After-Dark* needed him. It was his home-from-home. He belonged there.

'I'm ... not ready,' Miles said hesitantly. 'I'm still ... jumpy, you know, after my bad patch.'

His bad patch. That's what he had come to call it, the awful, unspeakable thing that had happened to him and driven him to total breakdown. *His bad patch*. It was such a classic bit of Miles understatement, a mask to cover something terrible.

'I'm just not ready to come back yet,' he said.

'But one day, yes?'

'Maybe. I ... Maybe.'

'Would it help if you opened up to me about what happened to you, Miles?'

'No,' Miles said flatly. There was a pause, and then he said: 'Please don't push me on this, Anna.'

He sounded so fragile and damaged that Anna just wanted to smother him in a hug. Whatever it was that had happened to him had broken his spirit and traumatised him; the shadow of it still fell across some part of him. But Anna was resolved to be patient with him, to continue encouraging him to move out of that shadow and get back to his old self again. But all in his own time.

The two of them chatted for a while, Anna letting the conversation ramble away into trivia and silliness. Just for that brief time, her mind was relieved of the burden of thinking about Santa and Sharon Steiner and the horrors of Elm Crescent. She focused on nothing but her dear, damaged friend. She wanted to be there in Hampstead with him. She wanted to snuggle down on the sofa with him instead of being here in East London with just her mobile and a stiff drink. She'd even watch *Come Dine With Me* with him, if that's what he wanted (and dear *God*, he watched some crap, that boy).

After twenty minutes of talking rubbish and laughing over stupid things, Miles said: 'It's getting late, you've clearly had a long day, and I don't want to keep you up all night talking when you should be getting some rest.'

'And you get some rest too, Miles. *Proper* rest. Get yourself well.'

'I'm ... working on it. Do swing by here any time you're in Hampstead, Anna. I'm usually in and it's always a joy to see you. I'll even make sure there's a whole new sticky toffee pudding here waiting for you. A really big one. From Waitrose and everything.'

‘How could a girl refuse?’ Anna laughed. ‘I’ll definitely see you as soon as I can, Miles. I don’t think I can face this horrible world without regular doses of you. And I’m so excited that you’re starting to feel ready to get back to work. But for the time being, I’ve got a lot on. This investigation I’m working on is important, it needs my full attention.’

‘Of course it does,’ Miles said, speaking with complete empathy. ‘Just be careful, yes?’

‘I’m always careful.’

‘I mean it, Anna.’

‘So do I. Good night, Miles.’

‘Nighty night.’

Anna hesitated before hanging up. She didn’t really want to say goodbye. Miles hesitated too; after a few seconds she heard him say: ‘Sleep tight.’

Another pause, then he said: ‘Don’t let the bed bugs bite.’

A few more seconds passed – and then he put down the phone at his end.

Alone again, Anna tried to hang on to the warm memory of Miles’s voice for as long as possible. But by the time she got into bed, her mood was darkening again. Some part of her felt guilty to have been joking around, talking silly stuff with Miles, while somewhere out there Sharon Steiner was cowering in terror at the hands of her murderous captor, alone and brutalised.

I’ll find her, Anna vowed to herself as she hit the light and settled down. *Even if CID can’t get their act together, I can. I’ll find her, wherever she is. I swear it.*

Stretched out on the sofa, Anna let the booze work its way into her system and carry her away into a fitful sleep. Nasty, disordered dreams crowded in on her. Ben and Sharon Steiner were there, drenched in blood, being dragged into deep shadow. And Miles drifted in and out too, looking worn down and dishevelled, the blood of the Steiners splashing across him and staining his clothes deep scarlet.

And there, brooding over this whole jumble of horrible images, was a big, dark shape which, despite being faceless and silent, Anna somehow knew represented Detective Inspector Jim Townsend, glaring at her, pouring his silent hatred over her like poisonous fumes, cooking up plans and plots and acts of vengeance against her to teach her – once and for all – the price she could expect to pay for making powerful enemies in high places ...

Anna woke suddenly, more anxious and fretful than before. The room was dark and still. It was just gone 1.00 a.m.

Why was her heart beating so rapidly? Why were nerves jangling throughout her body? Had there been a noise? Had something jolted her awake?

Slowly, stiffly, she sat up on the sofa where she had fallen asleep, peering about the room. All was as it should be. There was nothing to be frightened of. The flat was secure, there was nobody else here, she was perfectly safe. There was nothing left for her to do except pad across to the bedroom, throw off her clothes, get under the big, warm duvet and ...

Bang!

It was a dull, fist-like noise slamming hard against the front door.

Anna jumped, her heart leaping into her throat.

So *that’s* what had woken her up! Somebody had banged at the door while she was sleeping. And now they had banged again.

Her fists clenched and drawn tightly against her chest, Anna edged her way into the living room towards the front door, all the while bracing herself for another thud. But there was nothing. Just silence.

Two or three feet from the door, she stopped and stood there, waiting.

More silence.

‘Who is it?’ she called out at last.

No answer.

Shaking, she plucked up the courage to bring her eye closer and closer to the little spy hole. The fish-eye lens showed the street outside. Nobody about.

Still jittery and jumpy, her heart thudding against her ribs, Anna fumbled clumsily with the latch, got the door open, and thrust her head out. There was no sign of anyone. Not a soul.

Except ...

There at her feet was a box, about the size of a hat box. A present. A Christmas present, neatly wrapped in shiny paper depicting the repeated image of a partridge in a pear tree. There was even a red ribbon tied into a decorous bow, and a nametag attached, also bearing the image of partridge in a pear tree.

Once again, she looked up and down the street, as if the mystery caller would suddenly be revealed. But there was no sign of him now.

Anna picked up the present. Something moved about inside, not heavy but certainly solid. Tipping it this way and that, she got the impression that there was liquid inside.

She turned the gift tag so that she could read what was written inside it. In red ink, and in bold capitals, she saw the words:

**ON THE FIRST DAY OF CHRISTMAS
MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME ...**

Instinctively, she guessed it was from Miles. Before his ‘bad patch’, it had been a habit of his to leave little gifts on her desk to find when she came into the *After-Dark* offices.

As she carried his mystery present into the flat, she wished he’d hadn’t just left it and buggered off without a word. She wanted him here, even though he had always hated her flat and was forever nagging her to move out and find somewhere better.

Maybe he couldn’t say what he wanted to say in words, face to face. Maybe this present contained something that would make Anna understand what it was that was eating him up inside, what it was that was driving him to drink.

Sitting on the sofa, resting the present on her knees, she began tearing away the partridge-in-a-pear-tree wrapping paper. Beneath, she found a sturdy plastic box, airtight, water-tight, opaque. There were little hinged clasps holding the lid firmly in place. Anna unlatched them, one after the other, then prised away the lid and looked inside.

She didn’t scream. She didn’t hurl the box away. She certainly didn’t faint.

She merely placed the present slowly on the floor, controlled her breathing, willed herself not to vomit, forced herself not to panic, walked calmly – if shakily – to the telephone, and dialled 999.

Chapter 2

The police officers who arrived at her flat took both Anna, and her ‘present’, back with them to the station. By 2 a.m. she was sitting in an interview room, drinking coffee, waiting to be interviewed. The image of what had been in that ‘present’ was still fresh in her mind. The image, and the *smell*. With the utmost clarity, she could recall lifting the lid from the container and at once being assailed by the sickeningly sweet stench of stale meat. Then she saw blood, thick and congealed to the consistency of custard, and a glistening red mush of raw flesh all heaped and slopped in the middle of it.

That awful memory was replaying itself inside her mind, over and over, when the door opened and the detective who was to take her statement strode in. At sight of him, Anna felt her blood run cold.

Detective Inspector Jim Townsend did not make eye contact with her as he settled himself behind the desk in front of her. Nor did he say a word. He glanced through a slim sheaf of papers, checked that the microphone on the table was working, looked at his watch, poured himself a cup of water, took his time sipping it, adjusted his chair – and then, and only then, did he look across at Anna.

There was a tense moment of silence between them.

Then Townsend spoke: ‘The standard procedure for commencing an interview such as this is for me to introduce myself. And I know that you’re a stickler for standard procedure, Ms Vaughan. So we’ll play this strictly by the book. With that firmly in my mind, let me introduce myself. My name ...’ and he paused here, just for a moment, still fixing her with his icy stare ‘... is Detective Inspector James Robert Townsend of Middlesex Constabulary, CID.’ Another pause. ‘I’m here to take a statement from you, Ms Vaughan, about what happened to you approximately one hour ago. Please, start from the beginning, tell me in your own words what occurred, take your time, and ...’ yet another cold pause ‘... do try and relax.’

‘I would like to give my statement to another officer, please,’ Anna said.

‘I’m afraid no other officers are available, Ms Vaughan.’

‘I don’t believe that.’

‘It’s a fact. Now – please – tell me what happened to you.’

Anna sighed and ran her hand over her face. She felt tempted just to get up and walk out. It wasn’t like she was under arrest. *She was the victim here, for God’s sake*. She was the victim of ... of something ... something horrible.

‘In your own time,’ Townsend prompted her, his voice emotionless, his eyes unblinking.

Anna took a slow breath, tried to forget the bad blood between her and Townsend, and said: ‘There’s not much to say. I was asleep in my flat when something woke me up suddenly at about one o’clock. For a moment I didn’t know what it was, but then I heard a sound, like a fist thumping against my front door.’

‘How many times?’

‘I think there were just two thumps – the one that woke me up, and then the second one I heard when I was awake.’

‘And then?’

‘I went to the door but there was nobody there ... nothing ... except for that gift-wrapped present.’

‘Were you expecting a present at all?’

‘No. Certainly not at one in the morning.’

‘And what about the handwriting on the tag, did you recognise it?’

‘No.’

‘But you went ahead and opened it.’

‘Yes,’ said Anna. ‘I had no reason not to.’

‘Do you consider yourself to have enemies, Ms Vaughan?’

‘I’m a journalist. Naturally I’m going to upset people in the line of my work. Certain *sorts* of people.’

‘And this didn’t concern you enough to stop you from opening this anonymous present?’

‘No. No, it didn’t. Like I said, I’m a journalist. I upset certain sorts of people ... and I don’t give in to fear.’

‘The very same thing could be said about the police,’ Townsend observed, and then he went on: ‘So – bravely, fearlessly – you opened the present. And what happened?’

‘I took the wrapping off, and the ribbon, and inside was this water-tight plastic container. So, I unclipped the lid ... and opened it ... and there inside was ... Well, I’m sure you know already.’

‘Yes indeed,’ Townsend said coldly. ‘And what did you do after you looked inside? Did you scream?’

‘Absolutely not.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course I’m sure!’ Anna snapped. ‘I’ll tell you what I did. I put the box carefully on the floor and called the police. And then I sat and waited with the front door locked until they arrived.’

‘I see,’ Townsend muttered, leafing idly through his papers again. ‘Well, Ms Vaughan, it only remains for me to ask you if you have any further information you wish to add.’

‘I ... I can’t think of anything.’

‘You have no suspicions about who may have sent this box to you?’

‘No names spring to mind.’

Jim narrowed his eyes, thought for a moment, then said: ‘Very well. Do you think any more relevant names might “spring to mind” at a later date?’

‘I doubt it, Detective Inspector.’

‘But you yourself told me you’ve made enemies in the past. That suggests to me that you might at the very least have *some* idea who could possibly have sent you this box.’

‘I’ve upset certain MPs and local councillors,’ Anna said. ‘I upset the Home Office once, and I wrote something that nearly got us sued by a pharmaceutical manufacturer. And, of course, I’ve ruffled a few feathers in *your* line of work, Detective Inspector. But I don’t see any of these people leaving me a box of blood and God knows what on my doorstep at one in the morning.’

‘I’m not in a position to say one way or the other, Ms Vaughan. This job has taught me that anything’s possible, that the most unlikely people are capable of the most uncivilised acts. Nothing’s off-limits, not when it comes to human behaviour.’

‘Well, that’s *one* thing we can both agree on,’ Anna conceded. ‘So – what happens now?’

‘You’re free to go,’ Townsend said, gathering up his things and no longer making eye contact with her.

‘I know I’m free to go, Detective Inspector, I was *always* free to go. I was asking about what *you* are going to do about what happened to me?’

‘We shall pursue an investigation as per standard procedures – by the book – just the way you like it, Ms Vaughan. *By the book*. That’s all I can say. Please go through to the waiting area – a police constable will see about getting you home to your flat.’

‘Excuse me, I feel like you’re giving me the brush-off,’ Anna said.

‘I can’t help how you feel,’ said Townsend, getting to his feet and heading for the door without so much as a glance in her direction. ‘We’ll be in touch if we have anything to report. Good night, Ms Vaughan.’

But as he opened the door to leave, Anna jumped up and strode over to him, blocking his way. Now, at last, he was forced to make eye contact with her. The two of them stared at each other, very close, almost nose to nose.

‘I don’t want you dealing with my case,’ Anna said flatly.

‘It’s not your decision,’ Townsend replied.

‘I’m *making* it my decision. I don’t have faith in your competency, Detective Inspector.’

‘You’ll have to take the issue up with my Chief Inspector.’

‘I don’t think you’re good at your job. You’ve certainly screwed things up with your investigation into the Steiners.’

‘Get out of my way, Ms Vaughan.’

‘Not until you tell me the name of the officer you’re passing my case on to.’

‘I said, get out of my way, Ms Vaughan. I don’t have time for this nonsense, I’m a very busy man.’

‘I’ll tell you again, you’re incompetent. And worse than that, you’re prejudiced. Against *me*.’

‘I’m becoming increasingly tired of dealing with you, Ms Vaughan.’

‘You know what? I don’t care. I don’t care if you handle my case or not, it doesn’t matter a damn, not compared to what’s happened to Ben and Sharon Steiner. Forget me, go out there and find *her*, Detective Inspector Townsend, find Sharon Steiner. Do your bloody job. More than that – *show some humanity*. Get your damned investigation sorted out, get your team into shape, and find Sharon Steiner while there’s still anything left of her to find!’

Townsend stared at her, his face expressionless except for the flexing of his jaw muscles. Then, in a very low voice, he said: ‘Accompany me to my office, Ms Vaughan.’

‘Accompany you to your office!’ Anna snorted. ‘What the hell are you, the head-bloody-master?!’

He pushed past her and stormed along a corridor, reaching the door to his office and flinging it open with a resounding bang.

‘In!’ he ordered.

‘This isn’t a police state yet, you know.’

‘In!’

‘Another time, Detective Inspector. I’m busy too. I have to get home and write an article ... about you, and how you’ve behaved here tonight. Who knows, it might just finish your career. It certainly won’t do your promotion prospects any favours.’

‘In!’

‘I’ll make my own way home,’ Anna said, and with that she turned on her heel to walk away.

‘Ms Vaughan,’ Townsend called after her. ‘One last thing before you go.’

Anna stopped, sighed heavily, and waited.

‘Well?’

‘I just wanted to say ... well done.’

Nonplussed, Anna turned round and looked back along the corridor at Detective Inspector Townsend. But now she saw that Townsend’s whole demeanour had changed. He was smiling. His eyes were smiling, all the iciness and aggression melted away from them.

‘I mean it, Ms Vaughan,’ he said, and there was warmth in his voice, there was humanity. ‘It’s one thing to stand up to the police at a press conference surrounded by fellow reporters – but it takes *real* guts to do it alone, without backup, in the depths of a police station at two in the morning. So – well done. And please accept my apologies. I would rather not have had to put you through such rough treatment just now. Rest assured that I would never have subjected you to any of it without good reason. A *damn* good reason.’

‘Good reason? I ... I don’t understand what you’re talking about.’

‘The Steiner case. You have no idea what’s *really* happening with it, Ms Vaughan. No idea at all. And given what’s happened to you tonight, with that so-called present turning up on your doorstep, it looks like you’re far, far more involved with that case than you can imagine.’

‘I ... I ...’

Townsend held out his hand to her, a genuine gesture.

‘Please, come through to my office and I’ll explain everything,’ he said. ‘It’s important, Ms Vaughan – not just to the Steiner case, but to you, personally. I need to speak to you. Your life might very well depend on it.’

Anna stepped warily into Townsend’s office. She still didn’t trust him. Even less did she understand what the hell was going on with him.

‘Please, take a seat,’ he said.

Gingerly, she sat down. Townsend settled himself behind his desk across from her. It was the same arrangement as in the interview room just moments before, but the atmosphere was now completely different. The sense of hostility was gone. Townsend gently offered Anna another coffee, apologised again for his earlier treatment of her, and then dug out a file from his desk drawer.

‘Look familiar?’ he asked, sliding the file across to her.

Anna opened it and leafed through the pages inside. They were transcripts of emails – the emails sent to her by the ‘whistleblower’ inside CID – and the emails Anna had sent back in return.

‘You’ve been monitoring me all along, I take it,’ Anna said.

‘In a manner of speaking. This whistleblower you’ve been communicating with – it’s *me*, Ms Vaughan. All that so-called insider information you’ve been receiving came from the laptop sitting here on this very desk between us.’

‘But ... But I ...’

‘Had a single word of it been *true*, Ms Vaughan, you would of course have been totally justified to make it public in your newspaper articles. As it happens, it wasn’t true at all. It was lies, Ms Vaughan. I fabricated everything – the cock-up with forensics, the missing CCTV footage, the procedural irregularities.’

‘You duped me.’

‘Yes,’ said Townsend, without a hint of gloating. He was, if anything, apologetic. ‘Yes, Ms Vaughan, I duped you. And you will, of course, be keen to know *why*. Well, now the deception has been revealed, the time has come to explain what’s really going on with the Steiner investigation.’

He opened up his laptop. An audio-visual screen behind his desk lit up, displaying a police forensics photograph.

‘This is the Steiners’ bedroom as we found it after the abduction,’ Townsend explained. ‘As you can see, the bed sheets are all disturbed, a chair is tipped over, there are signs of a struggle all around the room ... and, of course, there’s the blood.’

A second photograph showed a huge black mass of blood on the floor beside the bed and thick, red streaks leading away from it towards the door.

‘It’s Ben Steiner’s blood,’ Townsend went on. ‘Forensics got an ID on it almost straight away – despite what we led you to believe, Ms Vaughan. We’re pretty sure he was attacked in the bed with an axe of some sort, that his body fell here, next to the bed, and that he was then dragged – either dead or unconscious – across the floor.’

A third photo showed the blood streaks leading across the Steiners’ first-floor landing and disappearing into the bathroom.

‘The body, what’s left of it, was found in the bath tub. Do you have a strong stomach, Ms Vaughan?’

‘I ... um ... well ...’

‘I can jump ahead. You don’t *need* to see it.’

‘No. No, I can take it. Show me.’

She regretted it almost at once. But although she winced, she forced herself not to look away.

‘We think the axe that was used on Ben Steiner in the bedroom is the same on that was used to dismember him in the bath tub,’ Townsend said, staring at the horrific photograph on the screen with cool professional detachment. ‘As you can see, Mr Steiner’s body was completely hacked to pieces.’

The head is missing, as are several internal organs – the heart, the spleen, the liver. Everything was left piled up here, as you can see. Are you all right, Ms Vaughan?

Anna was no longer looking at the photograph. She had her hand over her mouth and was breathing slowly and deeply.

A few seconds later she had composed herself. When she looked back, the screen was blank again.

‘Okay?’ Townsend asked, genuinely concerned.

Anna nodded, swallowed, then said: ‘And what about Sharon Steiner? Any idea what happened to her?’

‘No, apart from the fact that she’s missing. There was a small quantity of her blood on one of the pillows, suggesting she was struck or attacked in some way while she was still in the bed. It probably wasn’t a fatal attack, just enough to subdue her. Our assumption at present is that the intruder killed Ben Steiner in the bed, most likely with an axe. Very quickly afterwards he rendered Sharon Steiner unconscious, and this gave him time to drag Ben’s body to the bathroom and dismember it. After that, it seems that he carried Sharon away with him and completely disappeared. The only thing we’ve got to go on are a few grainy images caught on the CCTV camera of a petrol station quarter of a mile away. I’ll show you.’

He tapped a few buttons on the laptop, and on the screen behind the desk some murky, colourless petrol pumps and a stretch of road just across from them appeared. One, two, three jerky frames played in sequence, over and over on a loop, showing the barely discernible shape of a van passing by along that stretch of road.

‘The quality’s too bad for us to get a number plate or any distinguishing ID on that van,’ Townsend said as the loop of three images repeated itself again and again. ‘But the time these pictures were taken and the direction the van’s going in would tally perfectly with an intruder making their getaway from 19 Elm Crescent.’

‘But ... I don’t understand, Detective Inspector. Why lead me to believe that your whole investigation is a shambles? Why make me think that? And for God’s sake, why let me *print* it?’

Townsend poured himself a fresh coffee, settled himself into his chair, took a moment to collect his thoughts, then spoke.

‘We don’t know the identity of the man who killed Ben Steiner and abducted Sharon Steiner – but whoever he is, he’s not *entirely* unknown to us.’

‘It’s the so-called “Santa” killer, isn’t it,’ Anna put in. ‘The killer who always strikes in December, breaks into a home, kills the man, abducts the woman, holds her hostage until Christmas Day when at last he kills her.’

Townsend nodded: ‘All that stuff’s in the public domain, Ms Vaughan. But what you *won’t* know about are the Twelve Days of Christmas.’

‘What do you mean, *the Twelve Days of Christmas*?’

‘We’ve kept this information strictly out of the media. Nobody knows about it except those of us in CID dealing directly with the Santa investigation. You see, Ms Vaughan, every time Santa strikes, every time he abducts a woman and holds her hostage, he contacts us. He makes it very clear – crystal clear – that all communication between him and us is strictly private. If we speak to the press about it, the hostage dies immediately. If we keep it private, there’s a slim chance we might just find her alive. So, we keep quiet – and that’s when Santa starts taunting us with clues as to where to find the missing girl. These clues – or taunts, or whatever the hell they are – come in one at a time, sometimes two or three in rapid succession in a single twenty-four hour period. And each one is based on “The Twelve Days of Christmas”.’

‘Like the note attached to that awful present left outside my door!’ Anna exclaimed. ‘*On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me ...*’

‘Yes,’ nodded Townsend. ‘That’s Santa. Perhaps there’s a cryptic meaning in the contents of that present, a clue as to how to find Sharon Steiner before the time runs out. Or perhaps he’s just playing mind games with us. Or perhaps he’s just amusing himself. God alone knows. What *I* know, however, is that for the last twelve years he’s been doing the same thing, and every time CID fails to make sense of the clues until it’s too late. All we ever find is the body of the victim, and not so much as a trace of that bastard Santa ... until he surfaces again with a fresh victim and starts the whole process rolling again.’

‘Why does he do it?’ Anna asked. ‘Have you attempted to psychologically profile him?’

‘There’s a file on his possible psychological motivations that’s two inches thick, Ms Vaughan, but it’s no damned use to *me*. I’m not a psychologist, I’m just a copper. My job’s to find him, not analyse him.’

‘But you *haven’t* found him.’

‘We *will*,’ Townsend said firmly. ‘My team will. *I* will. This year. This year it’s going to be different. This year, *I’m* on the case. This year me and my people will get the girl back alive. This year we’ll collar that bastard Santa and we’ll bang him up for the rest of his life. *This year.*’

He got to his feet and paced about for a few moments, tense and agitated.

‘He likes playing games with the police,’ he said at last. ‘Right from the start it’s how he’s always operated. He snatches his victim then taunts the police with clues as to how to catch him. Every time it’s the same. And every time he outwits us. We’re always too slow. We never work out the clues until it’s just that bit too late. But this time around, Ms Vaughan, I’ve decided that *I* will change the rules.’

‘I think I see your tactics,’ Anna put in. ‘You’ve deliberately made yourself and your investigative team look incompetent. That’s why you posed as a whistleblower and got in touch with me. You made sure I put all this stuff in the paper, and now Santa thinks he’s dealing with a bunch of fools.’

‘Precisely. Painful as it is to paint myself as a cretin in public, it’s a price I’m willing to pay to get Santa to drop his guard. I want him to get overconfident. I want him think he’s already beaten us. I want him to start making mistakes ... and I’m hoping that’s exactly what’s happened already.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘That “present” that turned up on your doorstep a few hours ago. It’s the first time he’s ever sent anything like that to an outsider, to somebody other than the CID investigators coming after him. For the first time ever, he’s changed his procedure. And that, surely, must mean something.’

‘But why the hell would Santa start sending things to *me*?’

‘I can’t answer that, Ms Vaughan, but this is the first time he’s ever sent a clue to anyone other than the police. It’s not like him.’

‘Maybe he saw me speaking up at the press conference.’

‘Quite possibly. Whatever the reason, the fact that he’s suddenly shifted his tactics tells me he’s thinking differently about CID this year. My hope is that he’s getting cocky, that he wants to run rings around the supposedly incompetent DI Townsend who’s been sent to catch him. The fact that he’s directed his first clue not to *me* but to *you*, Ms Vaughan, is a hopeful sign – at least, that’s how I choose to see it. I hope to God I’m right; we might just have a chance to save that poor Steiner girl if I am. I’m sorry, Ms Vaughan, that you’ve found yourself unexpectedly dragged into all this. It was never my intention. But you *have* been dragged into it now. Santa’s dragged you in. He wants you involved. He wants you to come and play his deadly “Twelve Days of Christmas” game. And I’m sorry to say that it’s too late for you to back out now.’

‘He’ll kill Sharon Steiner if I don’t play along with this madness?’

‘Undoubtedly.’

‘But if we figure out his game, and beat him at it, we could save Sharon Steiner *and* put a stop to Santa once and for all.’

Townsend nodded slowly and said: ‘I could use your help in this investigation, Ms Vaughan. Santa’s taken an interest in you. A keen interest. If he’s hovering around, even at a distance and in

the shadows, that gives us at least *some* chance of catching him. And the more he believes me and my team are incompetent idiots, the more chance there is of him becoming overconfident and giving himself away.'

'You want to use me as bait?'

'It's not what *I* want, Ms Vaughan, it's what Santa himself decides to do. Since he's involved you in his plans this year, then me and my team have to work with that. And that means working with *you*. Is that acceptable to you?'

'I don't see I have much choice,' said Anna. 'And if it means saving Sharon Steiner then yes, of course it's acceptable to me. I only hope I'm up to whatever it is you want me to do.'

'I'm confident that you're more than up to it,' Townsend said with conviction. 'After all, you've been road-tested already.'

'What do you mean, "road-tested"?'

'Why do you think I gave you such a rough ride just before? I don't normally behave like that, let me assure you. I needed to see how you handled pressure, whether you were tough enough for this job, whether you'd stand up for yourself.'

'I always stand up for myself.'

'I had to see that with my own eyes. And I did. I was impressed. You passed the test. I have every faith you can help us on this case, Ms Vaughan. The stakes are very high. But I think, this year, we can turn the tables on that bastard Santa once and for all.'

'I'm all for that,' said Anna. 'Okay, now I'm seconded to CID, what happens next?'

'The contents of the box you received have been sent over to forensics. I don't see what we can do until we get their report. Despite the lies I've been feeding you about our forensics team, they're world-class. They'll have a full DNA analysis in the next twenty-four hours. We might learn something that points us more decisively in the right direction.'

'Don't you have *any* idea who Santa might be?'

'He's like a ghost. He seems to be able to move around the country and leave barely a trace of himself behind. No decent sightings, never a scrap of forensics, nothing. My team at CID are working on theories and hunches and sheer trial and error, trawling through known names in our files and looking for anything that might connect someone we already know to Santa. It's all starting to feel a bit desperate, to tell you the truth. But we do at least have one suspect whose name we're keeping in mind.'

'Can you tell me who it is?'

'Victor Maxen.'

'I've never heard of him.'

'There's no reason why you should. He's nothing, a petty thief, has been picked up by the law a dozen times since he was a child. There's no reason CID should be remotely interested in him ... except for one thing. There's a minor police report concerning him dated three weeks before one of the abductions four years ago. Somebody was spotted lurking about outside the house the evening before the abduction took place. A neighbour called the police and the officers who turned up found Victor Maxen and confronted him. There were no grounds to arrest him, he wasn't in possession of anything, and the worst he'd actually done was hang about where he had no need to be. So the officers told him to bugger off and that's exactly what he did. Later that night, Santa broke into that same house.'

'Is that really enough to link Victor Maxen to the Santa case? It could simply be coincidence.'

'By itself it could. Except that, in the course of our investigation this year, we made a connection that nobody else had made. We found an arrest report from a month prior to when Santa's very first victim was abducted. Victor Maxen was picked up and charged with conspiracy to commit burglary. The house that police believed he was intending to rob was the house belonging to that first victim. The case never went to court in the end and was dropped. But that's *twice* that Maxen has been

positively identified as being in the immediate vicinity of Santa's victims prior to them being attacked. Twice in twelve years. Slim evidence, but even

so ...'

'Have you spoken to Maxen about this?'

'I've got people out looking for him right now. He's a slippery fish – but we'll find him and bring him in for questioning sooner or later.'

'What's he like? What sort of person is he?'

'Unremarkable to look at. You'd pass him in the street and not notice. Average height, average build. The thing to remember is how many serial killers fit that same description. Average, unremarkable.' Townsend shrugged. 'It's just one lead we're following up. Maybe it's a red herring. But he's the nearest thing we've got to a prime suspect at the moment.'

'Maybe now that Santa's taken an interest in *me*, you might get the breakthrough you're looking for,' said Anna.

'That's the plan.' And he shot her a sideways glance and added: 'God, I really *do* make it sound like I'm using you as bait. I'm sorry, that's not the way I want you to feel you're being treated.'

'I don't mind being the bait just so long as you get your hands on that bastard before he clamps his jaws around me.'

'He won't touch you, Ms Vaughan. I won't let that happen. I swear to you. I'm determined to outsmart him this time, to figure out his game before it's too late. And you're going to help me. Whatever was in that "present" Santa left for you, there'll be a meaning in it, a clue as to where we can reach Sharon Steiner. He wants to see if we can make sense of it. That's how he gets his kicks. God knows why, but that's how Santa's twisted mind works. But the main thing is that we beat him, Anna – may I call you Anna?'

'Of course.'

'And call me Jim. Losing the formality saves so much effort. Like I was saying, the main thing is that we beat him ... that *I* beat him, me and my team at CID. We have to outthink him, meet his match no matter what insane clues he throws at us, we have to be—'

He broke off, interrupted by the urgent ringing of his phone. He took the call, and almost at once his expression changed.

'Excellent work, Mike,' he said, getting to his feet. 'Take him to interview room 1, I'll be right there.'

'A lead?' Anna asked as Jim hung up the phone and went striding towards the door.

'Better than that. My people have just hauled in Victor Maxen. He's downstairs right now.'

'Would I be permitted to attend the interview?' Anna said.

'No,' Jim sat flatly.

'I'm not just an idle observer in this business. I'm involved.'

'I understand that, but I'm bound by regulations. It's impossible. But we can arrange for you to observe the interview via CCTV from a room we have set up nearby. I'll send somebody along to take you there.'

'I appreciate that,' Anna said, but even as she spoke Jim turned sharply on his heel and marched away, eager to get to the interview room and the prime suspect who awaited him there.

Chapter 3

A uniformed officer arrived and led Anna through a labyrinth of corridors until at last he brought her to a small, grey room somewhere in the bowels of the police station. She settled herself in front of a row of CCTV screens, on which she could see various angles of the interview room where Victor Maxen was being held. She leaned forward, bringing her face close to one of the screens, trying to get a better look at him. He was sitting in a chair, his left ankle resting across his right knee, picking idly at one of his shoe laces. He was much slighter than Anna had been expecting, with high cheekbones and narrow, unfriendly eyes. His lips were plump, almost feminine, but the teeth behind them were large and yellow and unevenly spaced. There was nothing appealing in this face. It exuded hostility and betrayal and cruelty – at least, in Anna’s opinion it did. It seemed to her to be the archetypal face of a killer.

But to think like this was to be prejudiced. Shifty eyes and bad teeth were no indication of a man’s character. Yes, he was a villain, of that there was no doubt – but that didn’t make him a killer.

As she watched, Anna saw Jim enter the interview room along with a short, thickset, burly-looking CID detective who was part of Jim’s team. Maxen stared blankly back at them without so much as a flicker of emotion. His only reaction was to stop playing with his shoe lace. He had been in and out of police interview rooms all his life, he was far too accustomed to this whole procedure to feel any apprehension about what was happening. He simply looked bored.

Jim seated himself across from Maxen and got the interview underway, announcing into the tape recorder that present in the room with the suspect was DI James Townsend and DS Michael Lowry.

‘We’ve got a few things we’d like to discuss with you, Victor,’ Jim said. ‘Feel like talking?’

‘Am I under arrest?’ Maxen asked. His voice was low, almost inaudible. Anna had to turn up the volume on the monitor to make out his words clearly.

‘You’re under caution,’ Jim said. ‘I’m hoping you’ll be good enough to help us as regards our enquiries into a certain matter.’

‘What matter?’

‘Maybe *you* could tell *us*?’

Maxen suddenly sneered, curling his big upper lip disdainfully. He did not look in the mood for any games with the police. He took a big breath and let out a bored, exasperated sigh.

But Jim ignored him and pressed on.

‘Anna Vaughan,’ he said. And when Maxen just stared blankly back at him, he added: ‘Come on, Victor, you know who I’m talking about. How did you first become aware of her? What drew your attention to her?’

Maxen continued to stare sullenly – and then suddenly he grinned, stretching his fleshy lips to reveal a jumble of large, uneven teeth.

‘Am I supposed to have killed someone?’ he asked softly.

‘What makes you ask that? *I* haven’t said anything about killing. Why have you jumped to the conclusion that this is about a murder?’

‘Doesn’t take a genius, old sport. You want to pin something big on me. I can tell.’

‘I’m not trying to pin anything on anyone, Victor, I’m just asking you about Anna Vaughan.’

‘Don’t know the name.’

‘I think you do.’

Maxen shrugged, pouted, rolled his eyes, and muttered something that Anna didn’t catch.

‘Can you speak up for the sake of the recording, Victor,’ Jim prompted him.

‘I said if you *really* want to fit me up, at least have the courtesy to tell me what it is.’

‘I’ve told you, I’m not trying to fit you up, Victor, I’m just trying to get to the truth.’

‘Truth about what?’

‘We’ll get to that. For the time being, let *me* ask the questions, okay? Now – are you sure you’ve never heard the name Anna Vaughan?’

‘I don’t know the name Anna Vaughan,’ he echoed sarcastically.

‘But you know her address. You went to her flat, just a few hours ago.’

‘Oh, did I?’

‘You dropped off a package ... or should I say a *present*?’

Maxen paused, examined the dirty fingernails on his right hand – then the ones on his left – and at last said in a voice so soft that it was almost a whisper: ‘I’m *really* starting to get the feeling that I ought to have a solicitor present.’

‘You have every right to one,’ Jim said. ‘But I was hoping you’d be prepared to discuss a few things first. Because you know why we’ve brought you here, you know what we’re interested in, and you know you might as well start talking to us about it. Right now, Victor.’

Anna was watching Victor Maxen’s face very carefully. Hints and traces of various emotions passed across his features – boredom mainly, and irritation, and a contemptuous exasperation for what he was being put through – but she saw nothing that suggested that he was unduly anxious; that he had any particularly awful secrets to hide. Here, surely, was a small-time villain going through the tedious rigmarole of a police interrogation.

But then again, would a serial killer as cold and as ruthless as ‘Santa’ ever outwardly show the signs of their inner evil? For a psychopath, there was nothing so very terrible about slaughtering innocent people. Sadism and murder instilled no guilt in men like him.

‘Feel free to speak about whatever’s on your mind, Victor,’ Jim said mildly. ‘We’re willing to wait. How about we start with Sharon Steiner. Tell me about her.’

Maxen thought for a few moments, then said: ‘Who’s she, a singer?’

DS Lowry got suddenly to his feet, tipping his chair over.

Maxen himself didn’t even flinch. He simply turned his face to look directly at one the CCTV cameras pointed him – and in so doing stared out of the screen straight at Anna, almost as if he could see her watching him. In a calm, clear voice, he said: ‘Note for the recording: one of the police officers has now adopted a physically threatening posture towards me.’

‘Fucking right he has,’ Lowry growled. He clenched his fists tight.

‘Mike,’ Jim said. ‘Please.’

Lowry held Maxen in a fierce look for a few more seconds, then sat back down.

‘Let’s keep this civilised,’ Jim went on, and he slid a sheet of paper across the table to Maxen. ‘Victor, I’d like you to take a look at this. It’s a list of dates. I’d like you tell me where you were on these dates, what you were doing and the names of anyone who can verify your alibis.’

‘Alibis ...’ Maxen said, ignoring the piece of paper and staring straight across at Jim. ‘Now you’re asking for *alibis*, that means we’re getting serious.’

‘Look at the list, please.’

‘I’m not prepared to say another word until I have a solicitor present.’

Jim shrugged: ‘That’s your right, Victor. Interview terminated.’

At once, Lowry said: ‘Can I beat the shit out of him now?’

‘Mike, I won’t tell you again,’ Jim said firmly. ‘We’re doing this by the book. Don’t screw things up by getting emotional.’

‘Twelve years.’ Mike growled, still glowering at Maxen. ‘I’ve been on the Santa case for twelve years, right from the start. I’ve seen every victim, everything that bastard’s done ... for twelve fucking years ...!’

Lowry stood there for a moment, his muscles flexing, staring at Maxen with pure hatred. Then he took a breath and strode out before he did anything rash.

‘Ah,’ Maxen said, smiling now at Jim. ‘*That’s* what all this about. You’re trying pin that Santa thing on me. Good God, you must be desperate.’

‘I know it’s you,’ Jim told him.

‘Knock it off. I’m just an honest thief, you know that.’

‘But you know about the Santa killer right enough.’

‘A humble honest thief who keeps an eye on the papers,’ Maxen said with an insufferable smile. ‘I nick stuff. That’s what I do. I don’t kill women.’ And then he ran his tongue sloppily over his fat lips, and added: ‘I do something *else* to women, old sport, but I don’t kill ’em.’

Jim called in uniformed officers to take Maxen away to a holding cell to await the arrival of his solicitor. Then Anna was escorted down to the interview room where Jim and DS Mike Lowry were waiting.

‘Well, that interview didn’t achieve very much,’ she said as she strode in. ‘In fact, I think you made a pretty poor job of it.’

‘I’m glad you think that,’ Jim replied. ‘I’m hoping Victor Maxen feels the same way.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t want Maxen thinking too highly of me – especially after all the time and trouble I’ve taken to make myself appear incompetent in public. You of all people should understand what I’m saying, Anna. Think about it.’

Anna nodded, the penny dropping at last.

‘You’re keeping up the whole pretence of running a shoddy operation,’ she said. ‘If Maxen really is the Santa killer, then by now he’s going to be more convinced than ever that you and your team aren’t up to the job of stopping him.’

‘His self-confidence should be sky-high by now. Let’s hope he gets cocky enough to start making some serious mistakes.’

‘Are you going to let him go?’

‘We’ll have to. We can’t charge him, we’ve got bugger all hard evidence to link him to the crimes, no DNA or forensics, and his solicitor will have him back out in the street by breakfast time, I can assure you of that. But it wasn’t my intention to keep him locked up. If we held him here, he’d clam up – and if he *is* Santa, then all we’d be doing is dooming Sharon Steiner to a lonely, wretched death wherever he’s stashed her. But now that we’ve had him in here and shown him just how desperate our investigation has become, he’ll resume his “Twelve Days of Christmas” games with renewed enthusiasm, convinced he’s already got away with it for another year. And if I’ve calculated correctly, he’ll over-reach himself. That’s my big hope, that his overconfidence will lead him to make a fatal mistake, and then we’ll get the chance to grab him red-handed *and* find Sharon Steiner before she ends up like all those others before her.’

‘Unless, of course, you’re focusing on the wrong man.’

‘We are following other lines of enquiry, Anna, not just him,’ Jim assured her. ‘But, at the moment, Maxen’s top of our list.’

‘What happens now?’

‘Well, there’s no point you hanging around the police station all night. But you can’t go back to your flat, it’s too risky. I’ll have a car posted outside your place to keep watch on the place, just in case he shows. But as for you, Anna, is there anywhere else you could stay for tonight and maybe the next few nights? Somewhere safe?’

At once, instinctively, Anna thought of Miles. She *always* felt safe with Miles. And she had an open invitation to swing by any time she liked – even, perhaps, at three in the morning, uninvited and fleeing from a serial killer.

‘Yes, I know a place I can go,’ she said.

‘Very well, then. I’ll get one of the uniformed boys to drive you there. Here, take my number and contact details, and be so kind as to give me yours. We need to keep in close contact. You have

to keep me fully informed if anything at all happens, okay? And you must also understand that you won't be able to write about any of this. What happens on this case is strictly confidential.'

'I understand perfectly. Writing's the last thing that's on my mind at the moment. All I'm concerned with is finding Sharon Steiner before it's too late.'

Chapter 4

A patrol car carried Anna across town to Hampstead. En route, she called Miles's number. He picked up almost at once. Anna guessed at once that he was struggling to sleep. Even now, nearly three years after his inexplicable trauma, he was still pacing around at three in the morning.

'Sorry to spring this on you, Miles, but I need a place for the night. Right now. Something's happened.'

'Oh God, are you okay? Where are you?'

'I'm fine. I'm in a police car heading towards you. Can you put me up?'

'I'll put the kettle on at *once*!' Miles said, and he spoke with such seriousness that Anna could not help but burst out laughing, despite everything. Perhaps it was nerves as much as anything else.

The uniformed officer driving the patrol car shot her a glance, but Anna ignored it.

'Miles, you truly are an angel of mercy,' she said. 'I'll explain everything when I get to you.'

When they reached Miles's Hampstead townhouse, all the downstairs lights were blazing in the deep, cold darkness of the December night. The uniformed officer watched from the car as Anna hurried along the front drive and rang the bell. He didn't pull away again until Miles had opened the door and taken her inside.

As promised, the kettle was indeed on. Miles moved about the kitchen making them both coffee, his mop of dark hair as chaotic and unruly as ever, but now flecked with grey. There were dark lines under his eyes, brought about by stress and chronic insomnia, but despite all that there was still an air of boyishness lingering about him, an indomitable spirit of life and humour that had not been crushed out of him by his ordeal and which Anna believed was the life-support system which kept him going even in his darkest moments.

'So – what's the mess you've got yourself into?' Miles asked, passing her a steaming mug of coffee. 'Tell Uncle Miles all about it – from the beginning.'

'I can't quite get my head around it myself! It's all happened so suddenly.'

'Is it something to do with that awful Sharon Steiner business?'

'God, Miles, how did you know?'

Miles shrugged: 'An educated guess. When you rang me earlier you were railing about CID having a serial killer on their hands that they were too incompetent to catch. I'm guessing the killer you were referring to is Santa. He's struck again, hasn't he? I don't get out much but I still keep a close eye on the news.'

'Yes, it's Santa. Do you know anything about him?'

'I remember he was one of the unsolved cases I was looking into years ago. But I didn't get the chance to go too deeply into it, my attention was on a number of other cases at that time. Santa's been operating for ... oh, let me think, it must be at least ten years by now.'

'Twelve. He's been getting away with it for twelve years.'

'And you've set your sights on seeing that he doesn't get away with it for *another* twelve years, I take it,' said Miles. 'But something's not gone according to plan – hence your sudden, though not at all unwelcome, arrival in a police car at three in the morning.'

'I've attracted his attention,' Anna said. 'I've shown up on his radar.'

'Shown up on whose radar?'

'Santa's. He knows about me, Miles. He knows where I live. And a few hours ago, he came to my flat.'

Miles jolted, spilling his coffee half over the table and half over himself. Anna at once grabbed some paper towels and set about mopping him up, like a mother with a clumsy child.

'Sorry about that,' Miles apologised, his voice sounding tighter and edgier than before. 'The thought of that monster getting close to you ... it really upset me.'

‘Well, I’m *fine*,’ Anna said emphatically. ‘Well, I say fine, what I mean is that nobody hurt me. But I did receive a present.’

‘A present? A present from Santa? Wh ... What sort of present?’

In her mind’s eye, Anna could vividly see herself tearing away the wrapping paper, unlatching the clasps on the plastic box, opening the lid and being hit by that stomach-churning stink of putrefying flesh ...

She shook her head to clear it, then said: ‘Something awful. Blood. Bits. A present from a serial killer.’

‘And you rang the police straight away, I take it.’

‘Of course. DI Jim Townsend’s on the case. Do you know him?’

‘The name doesn’t ring any bells. But Anna, I’m much more concerned about how Santa knows where you live and why he’d show up like that. What have you been doing to get yourself noticed by him?’

‘Nothing out of the ordinary,’ said Anna. ‘I’ve been looking into the Santa case and asking why CID have been so hopeless in making progress with it. I’ve got an answer to that, by the way. Jim Townsend’s not nearly as incompetent as he’s been making himself look. It’s all been an act to make Santa feel overconfident. The hope is he’ll get too sure of himself and make a fatal mistake.’

‘But how does Santa know about *you*?’ Miles pressed her.

‘I don’t know. Maybe he’s aware of me from the Underwood case back in the summer.’

‘Why would he care about that? I know enough about serial killers to know that they’re interested in nothing but themselves. Even their victims are just extensions of their own psychological needs. Why would Santa come to *your* front door and leave blood and bits for you like that? And how the hell would he know where you live?’

‘Miles, I can’t answer *any* of that.’

‘Well, you’re not going back to your flat tonight. You’re staying right here where I can look after you. I’d die before I let Santa or anyone else touch so much as a hair on your head.’

‘Let’s hope it won’t come to anything like that.’

‘I’m serious, Anna. I mean it.’

‘I know you do,’ Anna smiled, and she reached out and squeezed his hand. ‘Jim Townsend’s got people watching my flat in case Santa shows up there again.’

‘He won’t. He’s too careful.’

Anna nodded: ‘He *is* careful. Careful enough to be getting away with murder for twelve years. But now he’s fixed his attentions on me – for whatever reason – he’s going to make contact again, one way or another. He’s playing his game, you see. His “Twelve Days of Christmas” game.’

‘Twelve Days of Christmas? You mean, partridges in pear trees and all that?’

‘He’ll send in a series of messages based on the Twelve Days of Christmas. Whether they’re clues as to how to find him, or taunts, or just sick sadistic jokes that he gets a kick out of, God alone knows. But it’s how he operates, and he’s stickler for his own procedures. He’ll work his way through all twelve messages, and if we don’t find him before he reaches the last one he’ll murder Sharon Steiner and disappear again, just like he always does.’

‘And then pop up again next Christmas or the Christmas after that, and start the whole awful game over again,’ Miles said.

‘I can’t let that happen, Miles. *We* can’t let that happen.’

‘We?’

‘I want to find Santa and save Sharon Steiner, and I want you to help me, Miles. Jim Townsend and his team at CID are determined to crack this case but I don’t think they’ll manage it. Santa’s been running rings around the police for over a decade, he knows how to out-think them. But he doesn’t know how to out-think *me*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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